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AUTHOR Yoder, Jonathan L.
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ABSTRACT

The breadth of broadcast education often invites disdain from academic circles. This, coupled with industry expectations about "college kids" regarding their lack of practical experience, indicates a need for a restructuring of broadcast education based on a conservatory model. Ultimately, alterations in administrative attitudes and structure are required for professorial values to change and, in turn, for courses to change. Implementing the "conservatory" model from music would enable the development of specific academic specializations in broadcast areas. Professors could develop and refine their ideas and, at the same time, maintain close ties with industry in their specialization. The philosophical orientation and the academic structure of the conservatory model are both necessary if current "departments" of radio, television, broadcasting, film, and communications are to be organized as "specialist areas," such as audience research, lighting, set design, history, or international. (DAG)

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TOWARD A CONSERVATORY OF COMMUNICATIONS

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Jonathan L. Yoder
Assistant Professor
Department of Radio-Television
Southern Illinois University
Carbondale, IL 62901

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When I was a lowly graduate student at Northwestern University, I took a seminar in communications theory. The theories we discussed became the basis for our own attempts at broadcast analysis and social criticism. Our professor, Dr. T. Stephen May, cautioned us, of course, to remember that the initial problem would be to narrow our topics; "radio and television" was such an enormous subject area, he pointed out, that any theory of broadcasting would be just as broad as a "theory" of "book." The thought stuck. The analogy illuminated much about the nature of broadcast education, too, and consequently is the root of this proposal for a conservatory approach to studies in radio and television.

Many curriculum, research, and personnel problems in university teaching of radio and television grow out of the Academy's traditional, hide-bound disdain for what it perceives to be a "less than academic" concern. These problems might be met quite directly by restructuring broadcast education on a broad conservatory model. The resultant refinement of the many disciplines broadcast education subsumes could possibly mean wider academic acceptance, guarantee more concentrated research, and improve teaching.

The problems broadcast education faces have a depressing precedent. Journalism, for example, until recently, was regarded by many members of the American academic community as a suspect, vocational, too practical concern which had little, if any, relevance to a traditional liberal arts education. The reasons for the stand-off include a Germanic academic

structure, a jealous guarding of disciplinary specialization, and even unrealistic industry expectations.[1] Professors from other disciplines, such as Theatre or Oral Interpretation, might demand theoretical research; practicing mass communicators might demand immediate, up-to-date experience; and teachers of "communications" themselves might not yet agree on what they mean by that term most often used to describe their subject area. Indeed, course offerings and concentrations vary so much from institution to institution even today that it is nearly impossible to know whether a student has concentrated in Journalism or Speech or Business or "Vocational Education." Just in broadcast education the problem is complex. We teach production, performance, regulation, history, criticism, and news as well as business. Do students of literature have this breadth of education? If they did, if they were victims of current broadcast education curriculum practices, they would not simply study the writings in books, but how to bind them as well; not only authors, but also printing processes; not only criticism, but also cash receipts; not only drama, but also directing drama; not only theory, but also topicality; never only content, but always copyright. Can even the world's largest broadcasting faculty do all these things well? Invariably, faculty members catch carpings from both industry and ivory tower because they cannot. One professor put it so well it deserves sculpting into a kind of Mount Rushmore, even though he is talking about Journalism education:

> Ideally, to satisfy both groups of critics, the journalism professor would be a man who has worked in the mass media for ten years, won a Pulitzer Prize, acquired a doctorate and made a reputation as an outstanding researcher and teacher. In no other academic discipline is anything like this required of professors.[2]

Hard-nosed industry expectations about "college kids" further complicate this issue, and make any aspiring professor's life as secure as a second lieutenant in combat for the first time. In a recent article in Change magazine, Robert Carlisle writes, "For the student with a communications degree determined to get into broadcasting, the outlook is bleak. Jobs are scarcer than belly laughs in a soap opera."[3] Citing the 1974-75 NAB report on academic broadcasting studies, Carlisle gloomily notes that not only were there simply too many graduates cranking out of the diploma mills, but also too many employers skeptical of coursework taken in lieu of hands on, practical experience. It is an old story, of course, highly reminiscent of the days when street-wise newspapermen snorted derisively at the suggestion that one could learn the business in a classroom, or that "ivory tower" professors could have any knowledge of the media jungle.[4]

Solutions have had long and agonized births. Course consolidations, proliferations, and theoretical bases have changed about as often as Fall winds. Since the Second World War most of the development has apparently taken place, due to "the increasing drive towards professionalism in fields like radio and television broadcasting, public relations and advertising."[5] Toward this end, G. David Nottingham writes:

> Professional standards in communication arts are assuredly needed. The literature is improving and a language and grammar is beginning to take a formal shape. The professional or academic form of the studies demand that the idea of the profession be understood, that it gain its own disciplinary respectability with other areas of academic emphasis in higher education. It can be achieved by establishing a valid theoretical base and a high order of practice, as in any accepted profession. We cannot promote studies in telecommunications, broadcast journalism, or any other hybrid aspect unless this academic viability exists. Therefore, we owe it to ourselves as professionals to understand the workings of the industry to which this profession lends itself. This requires the experience of learning to practice an art professionally--of working with the applied aspects in all 'broadcast' drudgery and excitement.[6]

Broadcast- or communications-oriented studies are essentially "hybrid." Radio and television, for example, is not one discipline, but many; it is not education in a specialization, but education in a profession, much like medicine, law, or music. However, no central set of standards, objectives, or methods seems to exist for teaching a concrete body of material about broadcasting.[7] Certainly students should study regulation, theory, history, production, performance, even some business, to be well-informed broadcasters, if that is their goal; but each of these terms, too, vary as much as the individual professors who try to teach them. Very often, too, these instructors may not be lawyers or historians or experienced businessmen or seasoned performers. One attempt to learn just what is taught, a 1968-70 APBE study, did not prescribe content at all.[8]

Ultimately the change ought to be made through an alteration in administrative attitudes and structures because the realities of academic

life dictate that course changes in themselves mean little in the career of a professor unless those changes basically redefine his value to his department, university, and administration. Some schools and some departments of Speech, for example, have attempted to indicate both their disciplinary evolution and their changed relationship with administrations which may know their concerns only through a name, either forced (or happy) to judge academic viability, promotability, even tenurability by that name. Fierce guarding of these factors has, we all know, led to frequently unpleasant and spiteful rivalries between possibly overlapping departments.

"The change," Theodore Peterson writes, "must rest on a reorientation of faculty thinking, on a reorientation of the instructional program and on a distinctive approach to the subject matter of the courses."[9] Some have argued that a practical, hands-on approach is doomed to dark obsolescence by a rapidly developing industry technology. The student, they say, is poorly served by production courses which cannot keep up with either technological change or industry expectations.[10] In any case, can we expect to keep up when an area is tossed from department to department (from Speech to Radio-Television to Broadcasting and Film to Communications to Journalism) like a giant game of "keep away"?[11]

The solution might be found in a change in the relationship between teaching and performance and between the broadcasting academic industries. This change can be fundamentally accomplished by building an academic

structure for broadcast education on a "conservatory" model drawn from music. Its value is that it can, if implemented, enable the development of specific academic specializations in broadcast performance, production, theory, writing, history and criticism, and even perhaps business--although the last might best be the prerogative of business schools. Working professors could then develop and refine their ideas and gain recognition for their broadcasts, if they do any. Furthermore, this model really necessitates close ties with industry and potentially ensures the professor time to keep up in his field without having to worry about other areas so much as he must now. The teacher of Broadcast Regulation will always have his hands full keeping up with Nicholas Johnson's latest legal maneuver or the FCC's most recent rules suspension. If he is also required to teach International Mass Communications, Broadcasting History, and a section or two of production as well he must have little time for anything specialized or for research. Classroom instruction is also almost bound to become superficial and coursework repetitive.

So if we are to stay in the business of educating cameramen, floor directors, directors, and perhaps salesmen, we begin to focus our efforts by adopting this practical curriculum design. Improving both teaching conditions and research potential, it can begin to exceed industry needs and expectations. The conservatory model serves these purposes because its philosophical orientation, and its academic structure, can include both practical and theoretical aspects.

Granted, a camera weighing several hundred pounds and maintained by an engineer cannot easily be compared to a violin. The conservatory model, if pushed to its logical extremes, reveals weaknesses here. Music, for example, demands highly developed skills and essentially simple instruments; radio and television may, by contrast, demand highly complex instruments and comparatively low skills on the part of non-technical personnel. Camera operation simply does not require the degree of physical training and practice required by the expressive and individualistic violin.[12]

But training in camera operation can begin to approach musical training in completeness and imagination if done in this conservatory mode. Once the individual members of a production crew are screened and trained, program quality is bound to improve, and complaints about radio and television programs might begin to change as well. Tired old saws about the banality of broadcast programs might be forgotten, to the relief of broadcaster and audience. Otherwise restatements and old warnings about programs and the perceived inequities of the ratings system will persist. Even Newton Minow's complaints might be tempered by an occasionally kind, even praiseful, word.[13] There will always be a need for performers, producers, technicians, writers, directors, and so on; with this model we can begin to make certain, even more certain, that these are the best there can be.

Because broadcasting is a large set of disciplines rather than one, this model projects the abandonment of "departments" of radio and television,

broadcasting and film, communications and communications arts. These terms are really misnomers. If they are maintained, they must become inaccurate guidelines descriptive of little and symptomatic of bureaucratic obfuscation. Under the conservatory aegis we will focus on the training of producers and performers; we need not emphasize either present or future job markets.[14] And we can nonetheless graduate productive and highly capable broadcasters which the industry would inevitably hire. Specialists in audience research could hone survey designs; lighting specialists, set design experts, graphics artists would produce better visual effects; historians would illuminate those periods of early broadcasting about which we are still unclear, and thereby help us better to understand how our system has evolved and how it might change; internationalists could develop their extensive comparative reserach into broadcasting systems whose products cross national boundaries and whose effects are still on the sheerest speculation. Integrating theory and practice, the conservatory model can ensure broadcasting's permanent relevance to, and acceptance by, university education.

FOOTNOTES

[1]May Katzen, Mass Communication: Teaching and Studies at Universities (Paris: The Unesco Press, 1975), p. 11.

[2]Ibid., p. 22.

[3]Robert D. Carlisle, "Poor Reception for Broadcast Graduates," Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, Vol. 8, No. 3 (April 1976), p. 50.

[4]See Robert K. Avery, "Where We've Been and Where We're Going (or Need To Go) in Broadcast Education,"" Public Telecommunications Review, Vol. 3, No. 4 (July/August 1975), pp. 32-35.

[5]Katzen, p. 23.

[6]G. David Nottingham, "Professional Education Isn't All Academic," Public Telecommunications Review, Vol. 2, No. 3 (June 1974), pp. 2-3.

[7]Katzen, p. 26.

[8]Ibid., p. 27.

[9]Theodore Peterson, "The Changing Roles of Journalism Schools," Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Autumn 1960), quoted in Katzen, p. 33.

[10]Katzen, p. 35.

[11]Harold Niven, "Fourteenth Survey of Colleges and Universities Offering Courses in Broadcasting," Journal of Broadcasting, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Fall 1975), pp. 453-495. The 1976 Survey had not been published when this was written.

[12]Dr. Martin Maloney at Northwestern pointed this out for me in a recent conversation.

[13]Newton N. Minow and Nell Minow, "What Are We Learning from Television?" Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, Vol. 8, No. 9 (October 1976), pp. 48-49.

[14]I am indebted for the substance of this distinction to Dr. Julius Erlenbach, Chairman of the Department of Music, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.